

Powell performance demands review

WASHINGTON — Jimmy Carter, the trust-me president, promised never, never to lie to the American people. But in politics, unhappily, deception is a way of life.

His press secretary, Jody Powell, is as amiable a wool merchant as ever peddled stories out of the west wing of the White House. Last week, he demonstrated his skill at stuffing wool in the public eye. It was a superb performance, which deserves a full telling.

Powell had learned in advance that we were about to explode a bomb in our thousand newspapers. We had compiled the saga of some enterprising, if motley, Georgians who had just pulled off the financial coup of the decade.

For a paltry \$42,000, they had purchased \$12 million worth of fugitive financier Robert Vesco's prime stock at an obscure judicial sale in Panama. At least that was the paper value of the stock.

We discovered that the inimitable Vesco, himself, was behind the bargain. But the Georgians' gain, we also learned, was not supposed to be his loss. In return for their sudden prosperity, they had promised to get the federal government off Vesco's back.

Our inquiries led us to letters, affidavits and telephone messages, which indicated that the Georgians were counting on the cooperation of President Carter's two most trusted advisers. This was vigorously disputed by the two advisers, White House aide Hamilton Jordan and Atlanta attorney Charles Kirbo, known in the backrooms as Mr. Inside and Mr. Outside. They denied all but the most innocent contact with the fixers.

Still, the evidence suggested a multimillion-dollar political fix might be in the works at the highest levels of government. Our interest was piqued by a report that the payoff had followed a decision by the Justice Department to drop its efforts to extradite Vesco.

We went to the top to check out this report. Attorney General Griffin Bell personally confirmed that the extradition effort had been abandoned. He explained that the strategy had been exhausted and that additional extradition attempts would be "fruitless." There had been no pressure from the White House, he hastened to add.

It was a story, we felt, that required a full airing. So we assembled the details in four columns, with proper attention to Griffin Bell's explanations.

Although the White House is not a subscriber, the columns were delivered mysteriously to Jody Powell prior to publication. He made a hasty descent from the Camp David summit to seed the storm clouds.

First, he telephoned us in a voice of wounded innocence. He appealed to us, in the name of all that is patriotic, to hold up the columns. He explained that he was busy helping to save the peace in the Middle East. But we declined to schedule our news to suit the White House's convenience.

The next voice on the telephone was that of Robert Strauss, a tiger with a pussycat's purr, who has become President Carter's trouble-shooter. Unable to reach me at church, he settled for our associate Les Whitten. Strauss announced that my soul may belong to the church but my "a— is going to belong to Ham Jordan."

Strauss explained cordially that Jordan had retained the high-powered Washington attorney, Edward Bennett Williams, to consider filing a libel suit against us. The invoking of Williams' name, if not the mere threat of libel, should strike terror into the heart of a potential defendant. But we did not succumb to the psychological warfare.

Meanwhile, the indomitable Jody Powell, using the long reach of the White House, began scrounging for information to knock down our stories. He seized triumphantly on evidence from Justice and State Department files that the effort to extradite Robert Vesco had not merely been abandoned as we had reported, but had been superseded by a new strategy. Justice officials hoped to get Vesco expelled from his refuge in Costa Rica — the better to seize him and bring him home for trial.

This new information was communicated to us, and we immediately made changes in our columns to take it into account. Of course, this was information that we had sought from the attorney general and that he had neglected to include in his answers to our questions. We didn't feel responsible, therefore, for Bell's failure to give us the full facts.

But the resourceful Powell began citing the changes in our columns as evidence that our reporting was unreliable, not that Bell's answers had been inadequate. The press secretary called in certain reporters for elaborate briefings. They were overwhelmed with evidence that the Justice Department wanted to get poor Vesco expelled if not extradited.

Following the old adage that in politics there is nothing better than to be the victim of an outrage, Powell trotted out Jordan and presented him as a shorn lamb. We were portrayed as the culprits whose careless reporting had shorn Jordan of his good name. Never mentioned was the fact that it was Bell's answers, not our reporting of them, that had been careless.

We also asked the White House to allow us to attend Powell's powwows. We offered to face the reporters with him. We offered to lay our findings side by side with his. But we were excluded from the briefings.

The government does not own the news, but every president has tried to control its flow. Jimmy Carter is no exception.